



MEDIA COVERAGE OF BY-ELECTIONS

Held on 27th November 2025

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Finally, we extend heartfelt appreciation to the entire team of thirty-eight (38) media analysts and research officers who worked around the clock throughout October 2025 to monitor, document, and analyse hundreds of hours of broadcast content, newspaper editions, and digital posts.

List of Acronyms

CA	Communications Authority of Kenya
DP	Deputy President
ECK	Electoral Commission of Kenya
I.E.B.C	Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission
KANU	Kenya African National Union
KPU	Kenya Peoples Union
MCK	Media Council of Kenya
M.P	Member of Parliament
MCA	Member of the County Assembly
ODM	Orange Democratic Movement
TV	Television
UDA	United Democratic Alliance

Executive Summary

Media framed 27 November 2025, by-elections involving 24 vacant positions across the Senate (1), National Assembly (6), and County Assembly wards (17) as a litmus test for the 2027 general election and for the performance of the elections management board, IEBC and other stakeholders. The Media Council of Kenya (MCK), through its Media Monitoring and Research department, conducted a quantitative review of 78 media platforms that included broadcast media, newspapers and online media between November 19 and December 10, 2025, to assess quality, professionalism, framing, balance, tone, and thematic focus of coverage.

The study found that media coverage generally reflected growing professional maturity and adherence to the Code of Conduct for Media Practice, particularly in relation to conflict-sensitive and constructive journalism. The media also observed professional guidelines on election reporting, including their duty to voters, candidates and the country.

Coverage was highly concentrated in a few perceived ‘battleground’ constituencies, with Kasipul and Malava recording the highest number of stories, followed closely by Mbeere North, largely because of intense competition, incidents of violence, and, in some cases, fatalities and IEBC sanctions. News articles were the dominant content format, supplemented by TV bulletins; there was relatively limited use of editorials, opinion pieces, or in-depth analyses, while radio and social media were comparatively underrepresented despite their importance in previous elections.

Thematically, reporting focused more on party politics, alliances, personalities and candidate profiles over policy issues or voter education, with only a small fraction of content driven by substantive matters such as development priorities, electoral procedures, and voter rights. Little space was given to explaining voting procedures, locations, or safeguards, which likely contributed to voter apathy and limited public understanding of the electoral process.

Most stories were well sourced, relied on verified information, and accorded equitable space to the main competing candidates, with about two thirds of the content rated as balanced or somewhat balanced. However, nearly a third of the coverage was biased, often reflecting personality-driven narratives or limited diversity of perspectives. Sensational or inflammatory language was generally minimal, although some headlines employed ‘horse race’ framing and conflict-laden metaphors.

There were documented instances of misinformation and propaganda, particularly on social media, as well as six cases of gender bias and one attack on a journalist, signalling a continuing risk to gender equity and media safety.

The study further notes that voters, the primary stakeholders in any election, were largely marginalised in the media narrative, with candidates, senior government officials, party leaders, and IEBC figures dominating coverage. Voices and concerns of women, youth, and persons with disabilities were also underrepresented. Coverage tended to be reactive, focusing on clashes after they occurred rather than probing structural drivers of tension in hotspots such as Kasipul, Malava, Kabuchai, Narok, and Kariobangi North.

Mainstream media accounts were the leading authors of election-related content online, followed by political parties and candidates, with citizens and influencers contributing relatively little. Sentiment analysis of online discourse revealed a predominance of neutral posts, with about half of the remaining content skewing negative and only a small share positive. This pattern was consistent with factual reporting, voter apathy, and critical reactions to controversies and human rights concerns surrounding the polls.

The media generally avoided hate speech and adhered to conflict-sensitive reporting, supported by prior warnings and guidelines from regulatory bodies.

These findings suggest that, ahead of the 2027 general election, continued investment is needed in voter-centred, issue-based, and gender responsive journalism, alongside stronger safeguards against misinformation, bias, and threats to journalists' safety.

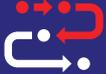
→ Introduction

The Media Council of Kenya (MCK), through its Media Monitoring and Research department, has undertaken a comprehensive quantitative analysis of the by-elections held on 27 November, 2025.

The study systematically evaluates media coverage across the country, examining how different platforms reported on the electoral process. The primary objective is to audit the media landscape for adherence to professional standards, specifically assessing the quality, fairness, and thematic focus of the reporting during this critical democratic exercise.

The survey notes that by-elections in Kenya have always served as a testing ground for general elections. How the media frames these localised contests is a critical indicator of professionalism and maturity in democratic debates.





Methodology

The analysis was conducted through a quantitative review of the election reporting data drawn from 78 media platforms, resulting in a total of 199 entries. Data collection took place between 19 November and 10 December, 2025. The study examined frequency distributions of key variables, including Primary Topic, Coverage Focus, and Media Platform, to identify dominant narratives. Further, the report categorised entries by their tone towards candidates and the electoral process (Positive, Neutral, Negative) to measure systemic bias. Specific flags for 'Sensationalism,' 'Fact Reliance,' and 'Hate Speech/Bias' were isolated to quantify potential threats to election integrity. Rare but critical events such as attacks on journalists were manually counted. The analysis was carried out using Excel.

Key Findings

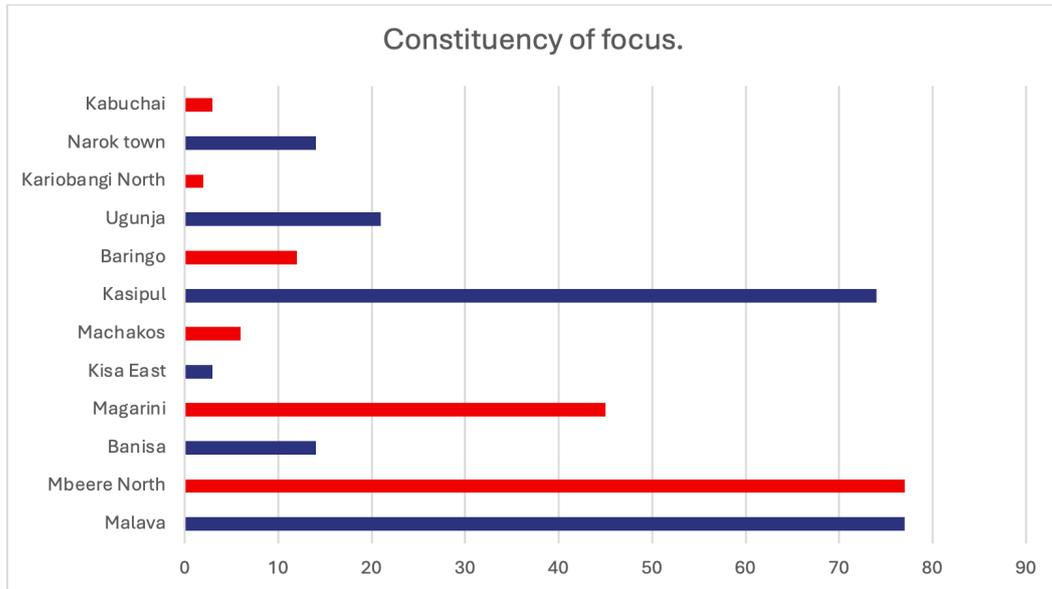
The media gave favourable coverage to the polls based on the political activities and interests of players in the political arena. Constituencies that received the most media attention were Kasipul (29 news items) and Malava (29 news items), followed closely by Mbeere North (24 news items) of the total 199 entries. This suggests that these areas were perceived as key political battlegrounds.

Media coverage of the elections was rarely policy-driven. Only 16.6% of reports were based on substantive issues, while most (27.1%) concentrated on personalities, and the remainder emphasised character and political party affiliation rather than manifestos. The most frequently reported topics were Party Politics & Alliances and Candidate Profiles, reinforcing the finding that media coverage was driven by the two-horse race narrative and individual actors rather than core issues.

Most of the reporting was constructive, balanced and Fair. Only a small minority was deemed explicitly biased and unfair." While most reporting was professional, some content published by the media platforms was clearly sensationalised (e.g., terms like war, battle, showdown), which had the potential to heighten political tension.

On misinformation, a significant portion of the reporting was flagged for containing 'significant unsubstantiated claims or rumours. There were six documented instances of gender bias, such as ignoring female candidates or using stereotypical language, pointing to a persistent gap in equitable gender representation in media messaging.

On the safety of journalists, there was one incident of an attack on a journalist, a critical red flag for press freedom and safety during the election period.

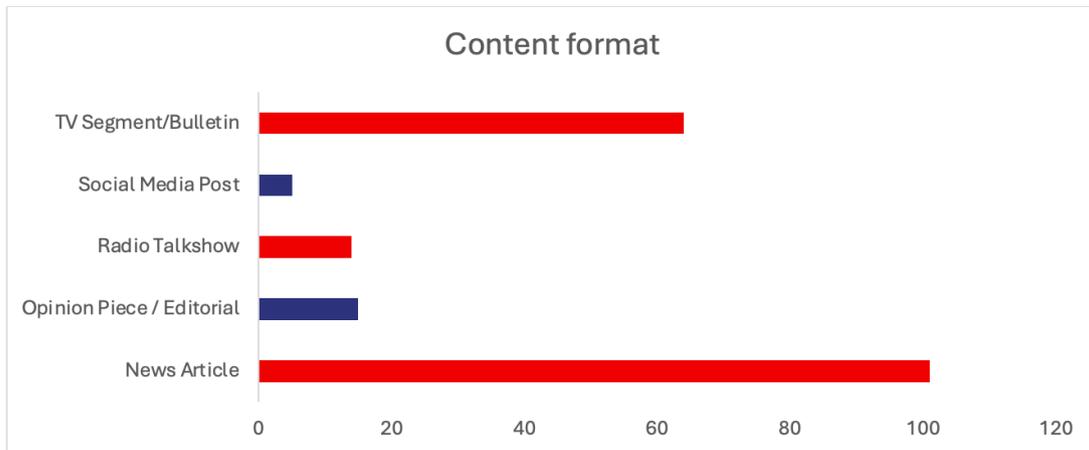
 **Analysis****Graph 1: Constituency of focus**

Media coverage during the by-elections was predominantly concentrated on three key areas, reflecting the intensity of political competition and reported incidents of violence. Malava and Mbeere North emerged as the constituencies that received the highest level of media attention, attracting the most mentions across various media platforms. This heightened focus was largely driven by the high-stakes political rivalry between former Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua and sitting Deputy President Kithure Kindiki.

In Malava, the by-election was framed as a contest between Western Kenya's political heavyweights, with Speaker of the National Assembly, Moses Wetang'ula, and Prime Cabinet Secretary, Musalia Mudavadi, on one side, and opposition parties on the other. Kasipul constituency followed closely in terms of media focus, with coverage dominated by reports of severe electoral violence, including clashes between supporters and a reported death. These incidents prompted the IEBC to fine candidates KSh1 million each.

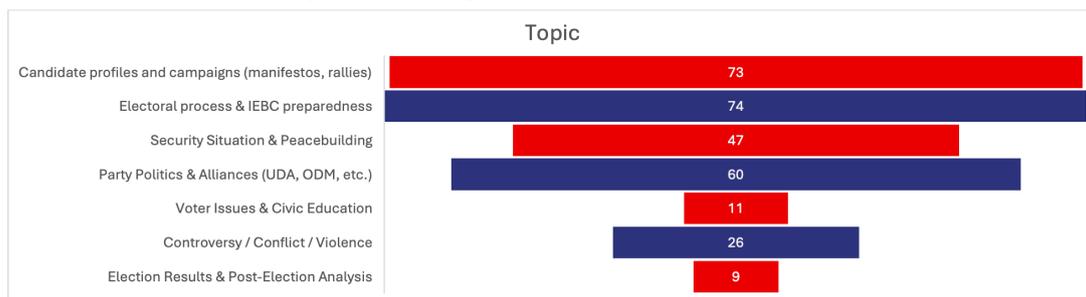
Magarini also attracted significant media attention, having been framed as a "litmus test" for ODM's regional dominance. This narrative was reinforced by the party's landslide victory in the constituency. In contrast, the by-elections in Kabuchai and Kariobangi North wards received relatively limited media coverage, despite reports of heightened tensions during the polling period.

Graph 2: Content format



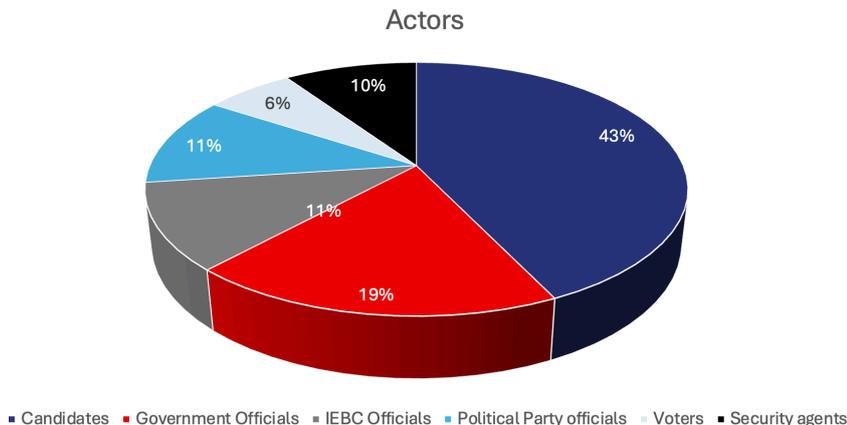
News articles were the primary source of information, suggesting that the by-elections were heavily documented in written formats, likely via mainstream digital news sites and traditional newspapers. The high volume indicates a focus on reporting factual developments, candidate profiles, and official results from the IEBC. Television segments and bulletins were the second most common format, providing a visual and real-time storytelling aspect of the elections. Prime-time news bulletins and live coverage at the tallying centres played a crucial role in shaping public perception, as reflected in the substantial volume of coverage. Editorials and opinion pieces were fewer, indicating that while facts were widely reported, there was less formal analysis or expert commentary compared to raw news from the media. While radio is typically a massive medium in most rural Kenya, the lower coverage here may suggest that the specific data tracked focused more on urban rather than localised vernacular stations. Surprisingly, social media showed the lowest engagement, despite its prominent role in previous Kenyan elections.

Graph 3: What is the primary topic of the media item covered in the story?



This section examined the primary topics covered by the media during the elections. Coverage was dominated by the preparedness of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), with particular focus on its capacity to manage the polls, funding shortfalls, and ability to conduct transparent elections. Media attention on candidates highlighted the high-stakes nature of the Baringo Senatorial seats and key National Assembly seats in Mbeere North, Banisa, Malava, Magarini, and Ugunja.

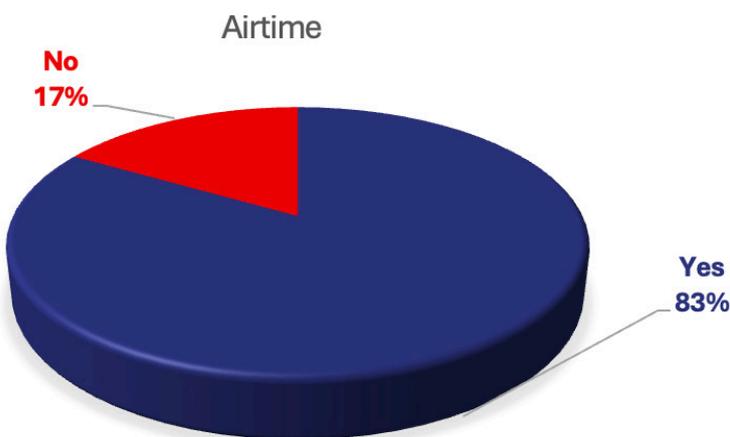
Graph 4:
What is the primary topic of the media item covered in the story?



Coverage was overwhelmingly centred on the political elites, including candidates and government officials, while the voices of the voters—the primary stakeholders in an election—were marginalised and received minimal space in the stories. This is a trend that has been observed in previous elections where the media mainly focuses on candidates, government, political parties, and electoral body officials at the expense of the voters.

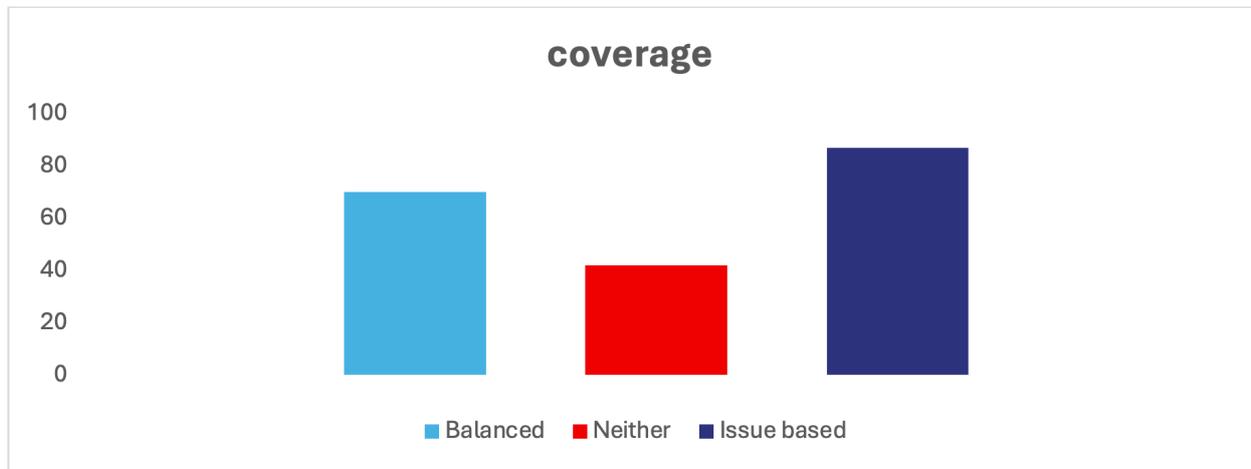
From media reports, President William Ruto supported both broad-based government and UDA party candidates. Rigathi Gachagua led the United Opposition brigade and was vocal in accusing the state of rigging plots and interfering with the IEBC. In Mbeere North, Deputy President Professor Kithure Kindiki actively campaigned for the UDA candidate emphasising government development projects. Cabinet Secretary, Mining & Blue Economy Hassan Joho led rallies in Magarini Constituency to drum up support for the ODM candidate, while Farouk Kibet spearheaded campaigns in Malava for the government-backed candidate.

Graph 5
Does the coverage provide equitable space for the main competing candidates?



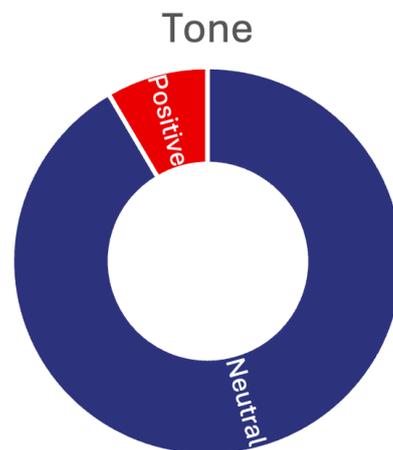
Candidates were accorded equitable space by the media, reflecting a positive assessment of journalistic practices during the electoral period, as evidenced by the provided graph showing a strong majority (approximately 83%) affirming balance, compared to a minority (17%) indicating the contrary.

Graph 6: Is the coverage issue-based or personality-focused?

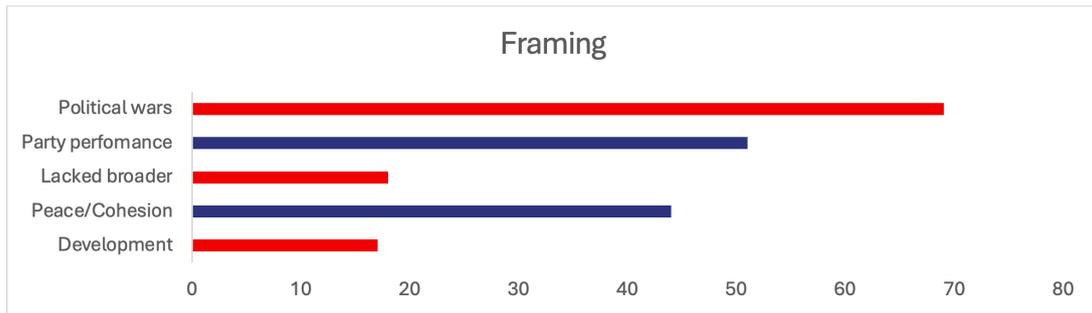


The majority of media coverage during this period focused on substantive discussions. Issue-based reporting concentrated on policy debates around elections, including voter priorities such as economic challenges of voters, infrastructure development, youth employment, and key electoral processes like voter turnout, polling logistics, and results transmission. This emphasis indicates that media outlets largely adhered to ethical guidelines, prioritising fact-verification and in-depth analysis. In some instances, the coverage was balanced, indicating that the media coverage was both issue-based and personality-based. During talk shows, article writing, and news briefs, electoral processes were regularly discussed.

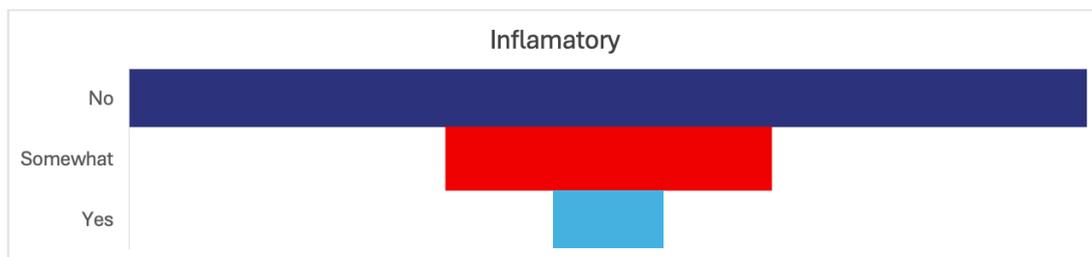
Graph 7:
What is the overall tone of the media coverage towards the electoral process (IEBC, fairness, credibility)?



Overall, media coverage was largely neutral, although there was a notable presence of negative sentiment and limited positive framing. Most reports were factual in nature, focusing on voter turnout, polling station logistics, and official updates from the IEBC, and were presented without overt bias or emotive language.

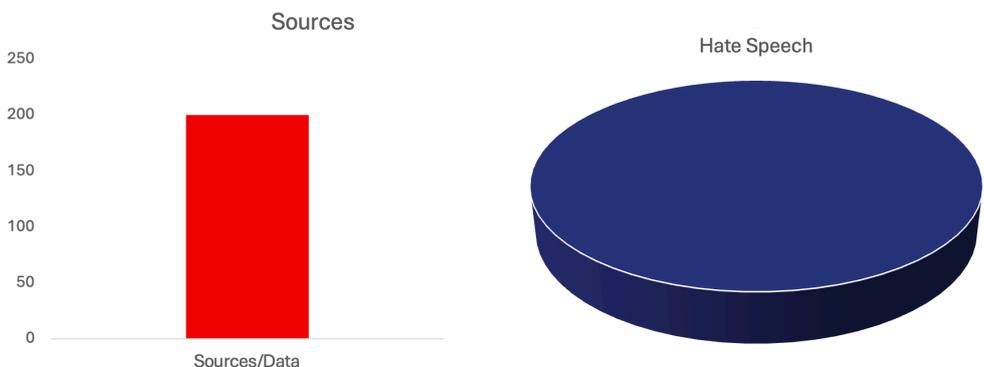
Graph 8: How is the by-election framed in the broader political context?

The graph indicates that media coverage of the Kenya by-elections was predominantly framed through a political competition lens, with comparatively less emphasis on development-focused and cohesion-oriented narratives. Media outlets frequently portrayed the 27 November by-elections as more than local electoral contests, framing them instead as rehearsals for national politics. Coverage largely focused on how political parties and key political figures used the by-elections to test emerging alliances, measure political strength, and gauge voter sentiment ahead of the 2027 General Election.

Graph 9: Does the coverage use sensationalised or inflammatory language?

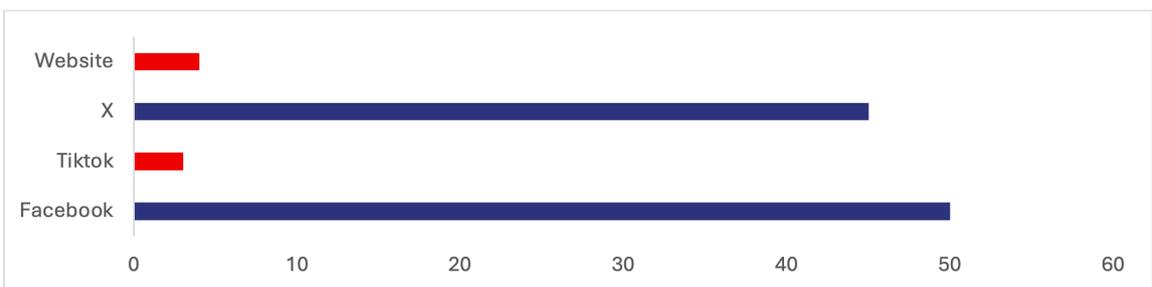
Election coverage was largely free from sensational or inflammatory language. A smaller proportion of media content contained mild elements of sensationalism, notably using "horse-race" framing that emphasised winners and losers or relied on slightly exaggerated headlines. Only a minimal amount of coverage was identified as overtly sensationalised or inflammatory. Despite the generally professional tone, instances of misinformation and propaganda were documented, primarily on social media platforms, where some bloggers and influencers shared fabricated or misleading content capable of inciting tension.

Graph 10: Sources and Hate Speech



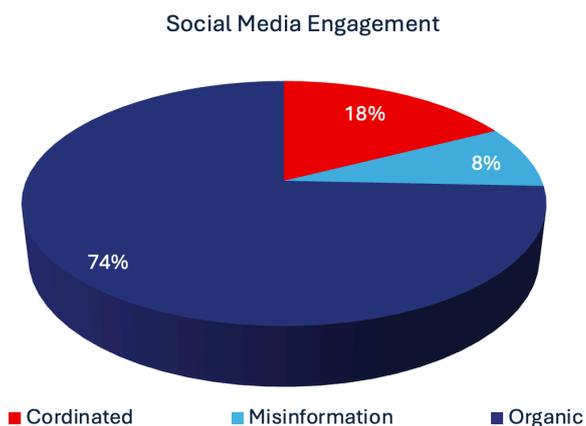
Data indicates that all media stories on the by-elections were well-sourced and provided sufficient, verifiable information throughout the electoral period. Reports from outlets such as Citizen TV and NTV highlighted real-time developments, including incidents of violence in Malava, Mbeere North, Kasipul, and Machakos, supported by footage and eyewitness accounts that enhanced credibility. This approach enabled balanced reporting on key issues such as voter turnout, security disruptions, and candidate developments. Rigorous fact-checking and cross-verification across multiple sources ensured that the public had access to accurate and reliable information. Notably, MCK media monitoring recorded no incidents of hate speech during the period.

Graph 11: Social media platforms- what type of social media is monitored?



Facebook and X emerged as the dominant digital platforms for information sharing during the monitoring period. From previous reports, campaigns use Facebook’s data-rich environment to target specific demographics (e.g., age, location, interests) with tailored advertisements. Political parties use X to dominate the national conversation through the use of hashtags.

Graph 12:
What type of social media engagement is observed?

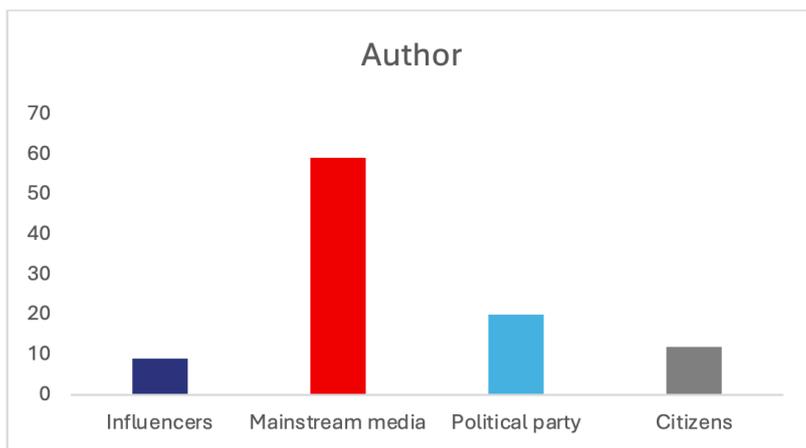


The data shows that organic engagement accounted for the vast majority (74%) of social media interactions related to the by-election coverage. This indicates that most public discourse and content sharing occurred naturally, driven by genuine audience interest rather than manipulation or coordinated influence.

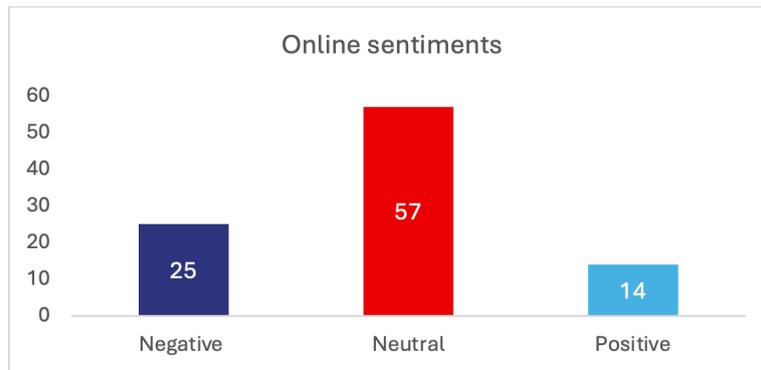
Coordinated activity accounted for 18% of engagement, suggesting the presence of organised messaging efforts, likely by political actors, supporters, or interest groups seeking to shape narratives or amplify specific viewpoints. While notable, this level did not dominate online conversation.

Misinformation represented a relatively small proportion (8%) of overall engagement. Although limited in scale, this segment remains significant given its potential to spread rapidly and influence public perception, particularly during sensitive electoral periods.

Graph 13:
Author Type (social media post)

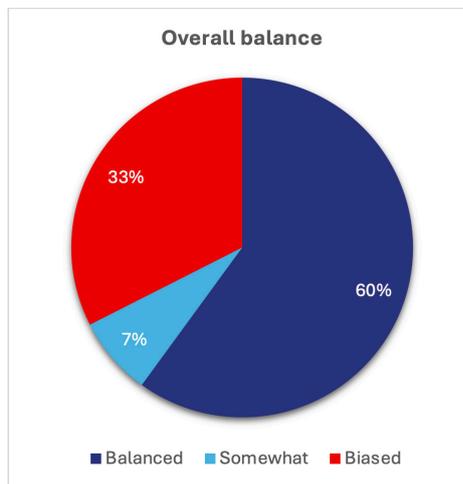


The data shows that mainstream media were the primary originators of information on the by-elections, far surpassing all other actors. Political parties and candidates contributed a moderate share, while ordinary citizens generated a smaller volume of content, with influencers accounting for the least.

Graph 14: Online sentiments

Online sentiment during the by-election period was predominantly neutral, as reflected in the graph. A notable proportion of the sentiment was negative, while only a relatively small share was positive. The high volume of neutral sentiment could largely be attributed to voter apathy and the prevalence of factual, event-driven reporting by the media. Negative sentiment appears to have been driven by controversies, security incidents and human rights concerns that were documented and widely shared online. Positive sentiment was limited and mainly associated with celebratory posts by winning candidates or content amplified by influencers, some of whom were reportedly engaged to promote specific narratives.

Graph 15:
How would you rate the overall balance and fairness of the by-election coverage?



The data indicates that 60% of the content was rated as balanced, with an additional 7% categorised as somewhat balanced. However, a notable 33% of the reporting was identified as biased. This suggests that while overall media coverage was largely fair and professional, nearly one-third of the narratives were influenced by political actors and influencers or lacked sufficient diversity of perspectives.



Conclusion

The media coverage of the 27 November, 2025 by-elections generally demonstrated growing professionalism and adherence to the Code of Conduct for Media Practice, particularly in conflict-sensitive reporting and avoidance of hate speech. Most content was factual, well-sourced, and neutral in tone, reflecting an encouraging level of editorial restraint during a politically charged period.

However, the analysis reveals structural gaps that limit the democratic value of election coverage. Reporting was heavily personality-driven and competition-focused, with by-elections framed largely as rehearsals for the 2027 General Election rather than opportunities for voter education, policy debate, or citizen engagement. Media attention was disproportionately concentrated in perceived political battlegrounds, often driven by elite rivalries and incidents of violence, while other areas received limited scrutiny despite experiencing tensions.

The voices of voters, particularly women, youth, and persons with disabilities, were largely marginalised, with candidates, senior government officials, and party leaders dominating the narrative. Coverage was also largely reactive, focusing on clashes and controversies after they occurred rather than interrogating root causes, early warning signs, or accountability mechanisms.

While misinformation and sensationalism were relatively limited in mainstream media, their presence on social media, alongside coordinated political messaging, poses a growing risk to electoral integrity. The documented incidents of gender bias and the attack on a journalist further underscore the need for sustained safeguards ahead of the 2027 elections.

While Kenya's media has made commendable progress, deliberate shifts towards voter-centred, issue-based, inclusive, and preventive journalism are necessary to strengthen democratic discourse and public trust.





Recommendations

1 Strengthen voter-centred and issue-based reporting

Media houses should deliberately prioritise citizen perspectives, voter concerns, and local development issues, moving beyond personality-driven narratives and elite political rivalries. Election coverage should interrogate manifestos, public interest issues, and service delivery priorities relevant to each electoral area.

2 Invest in investigative and solutions-oriented journalism

Media outlets should move beyond reactive reporting on violence by producing investigative and explanatory stories that unpack the root causes of electoral tension, identify early warning signs, and examine the roles of political actors, institutions, and security agencies in either escalating or mitigating conflict.

3 Expand civic and voter education coverage

The IEBC, in collaboration with media houses, should significantly scale up civic and voter education, ensuring consistent dissemination of information on voting procedures, polling logistics, electoral safeguards, and dispute-resolution mechanisms to counter voter apathy and misinformation.

4 Promote inclusive and gender-responsive reporting

Media houses should adopt editorial policies and checklists that ensure equitable representation of women, youth, and persons with disabilities, and actively guard against gender bias and stereotyping in election coverage.

5 Strengthen safeguards against misinformation and coordinated online activity

Media organisations and regulators should enhance fact-checking mechanisms, digital verification skills, and early detection of coordinated political messaging and misinformation, particularly on social media platforms.

6 Improve journalists' safety and accountability mechanisms

Stakeholders should prioritise journalist safety protocols, rapid response mechanisms for attacks, and accountability for violations against media practitioners, especially during election periods.

7 Establish dedicated election reporting desks

Media houses are encouraged to set up specialised election desks with trained staff and appropriate technology to deliver sustained, analytical, and public-interest-driven election coverage before, during, and after polls.

8 Enhance collaboration between MCK and IEBC

The existing MCK-IEBC Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) should be operationalised through dedicated funding and joint activities, including regular training programmes for journalists on election reporting, media monitoring, digital safety, and conflict-sensitive journalism.

Annexure: Survey tool

Media Monitoring Survey: Kenya By-elections 2024

Introduction: This survey is designed to systematically analyse media coverage of the upcoming by-elections in different parts of the country. The objective is to assess the quality, fairness, and focus of reporting across different media platforms.

Part A: General Information (For each media item monitored)

1. Media analyst name:
2. Date of publication/broadcast:
3. Media house/platform:
4. Constituency in focus: (i.e. Banissa / Kasipul / Magarini / Malava / Mbeere North / Ugunja)

Part B: Content and focus analysis

5. Content format:
 - News Article
 - Opinion Piece / Editorial
 - TV News Segment / Bulletin
 - Radio Talk Show
 - Social Media Post (Text)
 - Social Media Post (Image/Infographic)
 - Social Media Video (Short form e.g., TikTok, Reel)
 - Social Media Video (Long-form e.g., YouTube, Facebook Live)
 - Audio (Podcast, Space)
6. What is the primary topic of the media item covered in the story?
 - Candidate profiles and campaigns (manifestos, rallies)
 - Electoral process & IEBC preparedness (logistics, voter registration)
 - Security Situation & Peacebuilding
 - Party Politics & Alliances (UDA, ODM, etc.)
 - Voter Issues & Civic Education (voter bribery, issues like water, roads, etc.)
 - Controversy / Conflict / Violence
 - Election Results & Post-Election Analysis
 - Other (Specify): _____
7. Which key actors are featured or quoted in the story? (Select all that apply)
 - Candidates (Name: _____)
 - IEBC Officials
 - Political Party Spokespersons
 - Government Officials
 - Security Agencies (Police, NCIC)
 - Civil Society / Election Observers
 - Ordinary Citizens / Voters
 - Religious / Community Elders
 - None
8. Does the coverage provide equitable space for the main competing candidates?
 - Yes, all main candidates are given relatively equal space/mentioned.
 - No, one candidate is predominantly featured.
 - The coverage focuses on a single candidate to the exclusion of others.

9. Is the coverage issue-based or personality-focused?
- a. Primarily issue-based (focus on policies, development agendas).
 - b. Primarily personality-focused (focus on character, affiliation, history).
 - c. A balanced mix of both.
 - d. Neither focused on other procedural aspects.

Part C: Tone and framing analysis

10. What is the overall tone of the media coverage towards the electoral process (IEBC, fairness, credibility)?
- a. Positive
 - b. Neutral
 - c. Negative
11. What is the overall tone towards the main candidates? (Please rate each prominent candidate mentioned)
- a. Candidate Name: _____
 - i. Positive
 - ii. Neutral
 - iii. Negative
 - b. Candidate Name: _____
 - i. Positive
 - ii. Neutral
 - iii. Negative
12. How is the byelection framed in the broader political context?
- a. Party performance/politics.
 - b. A local issue about development and service delivery.
 - c. War between larger political coalitions.
 - d. A test of peace and cohesion in the region.
 - e. No clear broader framing.

Part D: Professional standards and ethics

13. Does the coverage use sensationalised or inflammatory language?
- a. Yes, clearly (e.g., “battle,” “showdown,” “war,” ethnic slurs).
 - b. Somewhat, uses mildly dramatic language.
 - c. No, language is measured and professional.
14. Does the report rely on facts and verifiable evidence?
- a. Yes, sources and data are clearly cited.
 - b. Somewhat, makes general claims without full evidence.
 - c. No, contains significant unsubstantiated claims or rumours.
15. Does the report include hate speech or language that could incite violence?
- a. Yes
 - b. No

If yes, provide evidence of hate speech, (a clip, photo, video, link)

16. Is there evidence of gender bias in the coverage? (e.g., ignoring female candidates, using stereotypical language)
- a. Yes, clear bias observed.
 - b. No, gender-balanced and fair.
 - c. Not Applicable (no female candidates featured).

Use of Sources:

- o Quotes multiple sources with different viewpoints.
- o Relies on a single official source (e.g., police, IEBC, candidate).
- o Relies on anonymous sources.
- o No clear attribution of sources.

Part E: Social media & digital platforms**17. What type of social media is monitored?**

- o Facebook
- o X(twitter)
- o TikTok
- o Instagram
- o Others

18. What type of social media engagement is observed?

- a. Organic discussion among citizens.
- b. Coordinated activity (e.g., bots, trolls, party brigades).
- c. Paid advertisements by candidates/parties.
- d. Misinformation/Disinformation being spread.
- e. Not Monitored

19. Author Type (social media post):

- a. Political Party / Candidate (Official Account)
- b. Mainstream Media Outlet
- c. Influencer / Blogger / Pundit
- d. Ordinary Citizen / Voter
- e. Bot / Suspicious Account (if identifiable)
- f. Anonymous Account

20. What is the dominant sentiment in the user comments/engagement?

- a. Supportive / Positive
- b. Critical / Negative
- c. Neutral / Factual Debates
- d. Hateful / Divisive
- e. Mixed, with no clear dominant sentiment.

21. Virality & Hashtags- List the main hashtags used (e.g.,#BanissaDecides, #MalavaByElection, #Kasipul).**Part F: Overall assessment****22. How would you rate the overall balance and fairness of the by-election coverage?**

- a. Balanced and Fair
- b. Somewhat Balanced
- c. Biased and Unfair

23. Observer's Comment/Summary: (Briefly summarise the key findings, notable omissions, or any significant aspect of the coverage that stands out.)**Part G: Safety of journalists****24. Please indicate if there were any incidents of journalist attacks.**



CONTACT US



www.mediaobserver.co.ke



[@MediaObserverKE](https://twitter.com/MediaObserverKE)



observer@mediacouncil.or.ke

Headquarters: Ground Floor, Britam Centre,
Mara/Ragati Road Junction, Upper Hill,
P.O. Box 43132-00100
Phone: +254 111 019 200
Email: info@mediacouncil.or.ke

Mombasa Office: Ground Floor, Kenya
Broadcasting Corporation Building, Sauti
House, off Moi Avenue, along Ngonyo Road
Phone: +254 111 019 220
Email: mombasa@mediacouncil.or.ke

Kisumu Office: Kenya Broadcasting
Corporation Offices, Awuor Otiende Road,
Milimani
Phone: +254 111 019 230
Email: kisumu@mediacouncil.or.ke

Meru Office: 1st Floor, Posta Buildings,
Meru Road B6
Phone: +254 111 019 250
Email: meru@mediacouncil.or.ke

Nakuru Office: Section 58 Area,
Opposite Crater Primary School,
along Kibwezi Close, 3rd Gate
Phone: +254 111 019 240
Email: nakuru@mediacouncil.or.ke